

GENERAL PATTON'S TANK

When people think about historic preservation, they usually think in terms of buildings, structures, and archeological sites. Fort Meade has such items of historical significance. Fort Meade also has many items of historical significance in the Fort Meade Museum. Many years ago there was a little rusting tank displayed outside of the museum. It was hardly noticeable. It was only after happening to review the files maintained by the museum that I discovered the little tank had been immersed in the battles fought by General George S. Patton's light tank brigade during World War I; and that the blood of at least four soldiers had been shed within it.

Few people are aware that Patton once served at Fort Meade after World War I. His headquarters was located on Chamberlin Avenue. The little tank was brought here as a memorial to American heroism during World War I.

In August 1918, while serving in France, Patton was told that the first large-scale independent American attack was scheduled for early September 1918. The museum's tank would be one of 174 tanks in the September offensive.

The first major offensive for Patton's brigade involved eliminating the St. Mihiel salient (a bulge in the Allied line). Patton's tanks were to attack from the south. The attack began Sept 12, 1918. The tankers helped to successfully accomplish the mission. The Germans retreated, the salient was erased, and 15,000 enemy soldiers were captured. Of the 174 tanks engaged, three were destroyed, 22 became stuck in the mud, and 14 broke down. Five tankers were killed and 19 were wounded. The specific role of Fort Meade's little tank is not known.

The next major offensive was the Meuse-Argonne offensive, which was to begin Sept 26, 1918. This time Patton had 140 little tanks. They faced German defenses 12 miles deep with four major fortifications. Patton stayed in the thick of the battle with his troops until a bullet entered his left thigh, came out near his rectum, and knocked him out of action. Although Patton was out of the fight, his little tanks continued to battle through the middle of October.

The final fight for Fort Meade's little tank is best told through the words of its last combat commander, Arthur Snyder. Snyder was an enlisted person when he commanded the tank. He later served in World War II and became a colonel. Two versions of Snyder's story are in the museum files, a meshing of the stories provides the following narrative:

"Although many have seen it, few persons know the gallant history of the old six-ton French Renault tank, the 'Five of Hearts.' No mere relic, it is a 'veteran' of the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offenses. It carried a symbol that had a heart in a diamond with five above it. Its serial number was 1416.

On Oct 4, 1918, our unit, with only 16 of 20 tanks in action, was supporting an attack. At dawn, the tanks started in advance of the infantry and met with stubborn enemy resistance. I was commanding a lead tank maintaining close liaison with 'Five of Hearts,' the platoon commander's tank.

Suddenly the 'Five of Hearts' veered, its commander wounded. A moment later my own tank was crippled by a German artillery shell. My driver and I, both unwounded, crawled to the 'Five of Hearts.' Finding it still operable, I took command using the original driver, Corporal Horatio R. Rogers. When we returned to the attack, we found that smoke and fog made visibility very poor. Our infantry was stopped by heavy machine-gun fire coming from a large improved field fortification. A German grenade was thrown at the tank, but did no apparent damage. Meanwhile we were wreaking considerable destruction with our 37-mm cannon fire.

Rogers was wounded by bullet splinters entering the vision slit, so I guided the tank back to our lines, found a driver, and pressed him into service. We returned to the attack. The tank returned to aid in driving out the machine-gun nest. Continuing down a ravine we came upon a stream which was crossed by a stone bridge. Orders had been issued to not use the bridge because it was supposed to have been mined. While trying to find a place to ford the stream, the engine of the tank began overheating. A German anti-tank bullet had cut the ribs of the radiator. The holes in the armor plates are still plainly visible.

After filling the radiator with water from the stream, a captain of the 16th Infantry approached me and requested that I support his company which was being held up by machine-gun fire on the heights across the stream. I explained about the orders regarding the bridge being mined. The infantry captain asked if any tank officers were present. I explained that the platoon leader had been wounded at the beginning of the engagement, and the company commander had been killed, so no tank officers were present. It was discovered that if the bridge had been mined, it no longer was, so I decided to cross the bridge. Only five other tanks reached this stream, and all were destroyed by direct artillery hits. As we attacked, the enemy outposts on the other side gave way rapidly, and in the thrill of the chase we advanced far in front of our supporting infantry.

The sport of firing at the retreating enemy was too good to last. My driver, shot in the throat, fell forward across the controls which stalled the motor. With our mobility gone, fire power almost zero, our position was almost hopeless should the Germans close in.

The Germans made a local counter-attack, and placed three machine guns close to the tank. It was this machine-gun fire at such close range that broke the turret on the tank, and wounded me. I remained conscious and continued to fire. Little effective fire from the tank's 37-mm cannon could be delivered because the cradle of the cannon became wedged with the enemy's bullets, the cannon was angled downward and could not be elevated. The turret could not be revolved because it was also jammed with the enemy's bullets. High explosive shells were fired from our cannon so that the

fragmentation would keep the enemy from gaining any closer quarters with the tank. Also, the driver and I used our .45 calibre pistols through the port holes in the tank.

A German 77-mm field piece was very near the tank when it became stalled. Fortunately, this gun, with its ample ammunition, was not manned. The breechblock had been removed when the enemy initially retreated, and in the counterattack it had not been returned to the gun. How long the tank was in its perilous position is difficult to say, for it is hard to judge time under such conditions.

Suddenly the enemy began to flee, and although I have seen many marvelous sights of troops in action and on parade, I have never seen a more glorious one than our infantry advancing at high port.

I took my gallant driver to the rear and left him at a medical station. I never saw him again. I searched the battalion's records but failed to locate him. Perhaps he told me his name or maybe during that eventful day we did not bother about such trifles. It is thought probable that he died of wounds in a hospital in France."

The Meuse-Argonne offensive continued through the middle of October. The light tanks continued working with the infantry to clean out pockets of resistance, consolidate positions, and spearhead attacks. The campaign lasted 47 days. More than 26,000 Americans died and 95,000 were wounded.

On Oct 24, 1940, Patton wrote a letter recommending that Snyder, who was then a reserve officer, be brought back on active duty. In his letter, Patton said:

"Captain Arthur Snyder, Field Artillery Reserve, served under me in France as enlisted man and later I had him commissioned. It was he who fought the famous tank 1416 until it had been hit over 1300 times. His driver was killed and he was wounded. There is no question in my mind that Captain Snyder should have received the Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, all eyewitnesses died of wounds before we thought about getting statistics. Captain Snyder is anxious to reenter the service, which can well use so gallant a veteran. I am sure he is the sort we want."

The Directorate of Logistics renovated the "Five of Hearts." After renovation, it was returned to the museum. Instead of being left out in the elements, the tank was placed inside a new wing. If you are interested in history and historic preservation, visit the museum and see the "Five of Hearts."

The writer is Chief, Procurement and Administrative Law Branch, Staff Judge Advocate's Office